

COMMENTARY

# Political Transition in Burkina Faso: the Fall of Blaise Compaoré

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This commentary traces recent regime change and political transition in Burkina Faso. After mass demonstrations Blaise Compaoré was forced to resign his presidency on 31 October 2014. His resignation was preceded by his attempt to change the constitution to allow him to stand for a fifth consecutive term in office. It is argued in this briefing that the way Compaoré's rule ended should have come as no surprise because it was typical of both Burkina Faso's political history since decolonisation and also the army's historical role in the country's presidential turnover. It was also typical of the current wave of mass protest struggles taking place in other African countries.

**Keywords:** Burkina Faso; political transition; regime change; protest; elections; West Africa

## Introduction

It had long been expected but in the end it came as a surprise that Burkina Faso's president, Blaise Compaoré, was forced to resign on 31 October 2014. In the hours prior to his speech spokespersons from the military and civil society alliance had already announced that Compaoré had been removed from power. This had been preceded by spontaneous riots and mass demonstrations throughout the country triggered by Compaoré's proposed amendment to the constitution – declared on 21 October – that would have enabled him to stand for re-election in 2015 and thus embark upon a fifth term of office.

The proposed amendment led to a mass demonstration on the 28 October with several hundred thousand participants which was preceded, on the 24 October, by a strike of students from secondary schools and universities that had almost paralysed the capital, Ouagadougou. In expectation of further protests, the government closed schools and universities throughout the country the following week. Then on the 30 October the protests escalated when the proposed constitutional amendment was scheduled for a vote in parliament. The state security forces used tear gas, truncheons and guns against the demonstrators, and at least thirty people were killed in the confrontations. Around 1,500 protestors broke through the police line and burnt down the parliamentary building and, shortly afterwards, they occupied the national television station in Ouagadougou. The parliament was forced to cancel its session and to annul the controversial vote.

Under pressure from both the protestors and the military, President Compaoré dissolved the government and in the evening withdrew his proposal for a change in the constitution. At first he refused to resign from office but was forced to do so by the military the next day. For the following two weeks the role of head of state was assumed by a senior military officer, Lieutenant Colonel Yacouba Isaac Zida, vice commander of the presidential guard (*Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle* – RSP), the most influential elite unit within the army. On the basis of a transitional charter that was signed by representatives of the military, political parties, traditional authorities and civil society, former diplomat Michel Kafando was appointed transitional president on 17 November and he immediately appointed Lieutenant Colonel Zida as prime minister. National elections are currently planned for 11 October 2015.

It was not surprising that the Blaise Compaoré era would come to an end nor the manner in which it would happen were Compaoré to resist stepping down from office in 2015. This is because Compaoré's fall was typical of the political history of Upper Volta or Burkina Faso (as the country was renamed in 1984) since decolonisation. It was also typical of mass protests that have taken place in Burkina Faso and other African countries in recent years that have cost presidents their office, and was typical of the central role the military played in incidents where heads of state or government are overturned.

In this commentary the end of Blaise Compaoré's presidency is placed in the context of the political history of Burkina Faso since the 1960s and recent struggles in other African countries over democracy, socioeconomic inequality and state power. The first section describes the country's political history since decolonisation, which was characterised by a series of strikes, military coups and

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changes in state leadership until Blaise Compaoré took power in 1987. The second section explains how pressure from civil society on Compaoré had been growing steadily since the early 1990s to reach its peak in the protests of 2013–2014, which led to his forced resignation. The third section explains why the latest confrontations in Burkina Faso can be described as part of an Africa wide wave of protests and, finally, the role of the military in the fall of Compaoré and the reactions of various civil society groups is discussed along with the prospects and challenges facing the country's future government.

### Strikes, military coups, and changing governments

Following independence in 1960, the first two decades of Upper Volta's history were characterised by recurring and alternating strikes, military coups and constitutional referendums (Englebert, 1996). The first presidency, that of Maurice Yaméogo, was overturned in 1966 following mass demonstrations by trade unions protesting against the limitation of workers' rights – particularly the ban on strikes proclaimed in 1964. A general strike in January 1967 was followed by a military putsch that saw Captain Sangoulé Lamizana take over the office of president.

A constitutional referendum in 1970 established the Second Republic. A further wave of strikes was followed at the beginning of 1976 by Lamizana's dissolution of the government and a further referendum. The Third Republic existed for only two years and in 1980 teachers throughout the country went on strike. This was followed by a military coup, the suspension of the constitution, and the formation of a military junta under Saye Zerbo. Following a further coup in 1982, Zerbo was replaced by Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo who appointed Captain Thomas Sankara as prime minister.

When Sankara was arrested only a few months after taking office – due, among other things, to his criticism of Ouédraogo's regime – strikes by students and trade unions forced his release (Hagberg, 2002: 228–9). In the following year Sankara himself led a coup supported, among others, by Blaise Compaoré who was also an army captain.

Thomas Sankara was a glamorous and charismatic figure and after his death he became an icon comparable to Che Guevara – not only in Burkina Faso, but also across Africa, Europe and the Americas. Sankara's popularity was based on his achievements in the fight against corruption, in health policy and in the promotion of women. This was in spite of criticism of his 'revolutionary regime' and its institutions, which were often repressive (Harsch, 2013).

His early death is fundamental to the myth surrounding Sankara. He was killed in a military putsch in October 1987 as a result of which his previous companion Blaise Compaoré became president. Not only was the organisation of the putsch attributed to Compaoré, he was also accused of being responsible for the death of Sankara – the circumstances of which have to this day neither been fully explained nor legally pursued. The coup against Sankara was the last for twenty-seven years and Compaoré remained in office until 31 October 2014. Compaoré's term of office ended in a similar way to that of most of

his predecessors as trade unions and students played an important role in the mass protests, although political opposition parties were also mayor players. In the end, it was the military that drove the president out of office.

### Increasing civil society pressure

Compaoré's forced resignation was to be expected. The pressure exerted on the president in the previous fifteen years had increased continuously and the length of time between the mass protests had become shorter and shorter (Chouli, 2012, Engels, 2015). From early 2014, large demonstrations had taken place almost monthly with trade unions and students playing a central role. Both had a long tradition as opposition political forces in Burkina Faso going back to the years immediately after decolonisation.

The trade union association with the largest number of members, the *Confédération Générale des Travailleurs du Burkina* (CGT-B), was founded in 1988 and was modelled on the French *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT). In addition to the CGT-B there are five other trade union associations: the *Confédération Nationale des Travailleurs du Burkina* (CNTB); the *Confédération Syndicale Burkinabè* (CSB); the *Force Ouvrière – Union Nationale des Syndicats Libres* (FO-UNSL); the *Organisation Nationale des Syndicats Libres* (ONSL); and, the *Union Syndicale des Travailleurs du Burkina Faso* (USTB). These six associations, together with sixteen individual, independent trade unions, form the *Unité d'Action Syndicale* (UAS).

The Burkinabe trade unions are organised along ideological lines; they all consider themselves to be political associations that are active in fields beyond those that are directly work-related (Kabeya Muase, 1989). The largest and most influential Burkinabe human rights organisation, the *Mouvement Burkinabè des Droits de l'Homme et des Peuples* (MBDHP), was founded one year after the CGT-B in 1989. In Burkina Faso, as in many other countries, university students and secondary school students are also organised in trade unions. The national student associations, *Union Générale des Etudiants Burkinabè* (UGEB) and *Association Nationale des Etudiants Burkinabè* (ANEb), were founded in 1960, the year of decolonisation (Bianchini and Korbéogo, 2008). Overlapping of personnel among civil society associations is commonplace; virtually all the functionaries of the CGT-B and its member organisations were previously organised in the student movement (Bianchini and Korbéogo, 2008, Sory, 2012). This is also true of the ordinary members.

As in most African states, civil servants form the largest group among trade union members in Burkina Faso; trade unions in the fields of education and health are by far the largest and most influential within the trade union associations. Due to the slow pace of industrial development in sub-Saharan Africa, large industrial trade unions are not as commonplace as they are in Europe. The fact that trade unions are embedded predominantly among the urban, well-educated middle-classes, and that student organisations consider themselves to be trade unions, explains why alliances and joint protests by trade unions and students are relatively easy to organise and take place

frequently. This also explains the fact that political protests take place primarily in cities. In most countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Burkina Faso, there are enormous differences between the urban élite, who speak the country's colonial, official language (French, English or Portuguese) and who form the core of the civil society movements on the one hand, and the rural population groups on the other (Hagberg, 2002: 227).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, protests – particularly by students and civil servants – led to a formal political liberalisation in Burkina Faso (and other African states) (Bratton and van de Walle, 1992: 423). In 1990 a multi-party system was introduced, and in the following year a constitutional referendum led to the founding of the Fourth Republic. In the first multiparty elections – which were boycotted by the opposition – Compaoré was confirmed in office. Immediately after formal political liberalisation, there followed the first phase of structural adjustment (the first structural adjustment programme in Burkina Faso was implemented during 1991–1993), and this was accompanied by trade union and student protests against the country's new liberal economic policy that was oriented towards the global market (Federici and Caffentzis, 2000, Harsch, 1999).

The next mass protests followed almost ten years later. They were triggered by the murder of the journalist Norbert Zongo in December 1998. Zongo, the founder and publisher of the independent newspaper *L'Indépendant*, had conducted research on the death of David Ouédraogo, a driver for Blaise Compaoré's brother, François. The journalist was found shot dead, and his body completely burnt, in his burnt-out car. The government declared that he had died in an accident. The next day thousands came out onto the streets and demanded an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of Norbert Zongo and an end to impunity (Frère, 2010, Harsch, 1999). Trade unions, human rights organisations, and students, joined forces in the 'Collective of the Democratic Mass Organisations and Political Parties' in order to co-ordinate the protests made by civil society against impunity. The 'Collective' still exists today and in December 2014, on the occasion of the anniversary of the death of Norbert Zongo, it mobilised thousands of people for a central demonstration in Ouagadougou, as it had done regularly in the sixteen years since his murder.

Ever since the mass protests triggered by the death of the newspaper founder Zongo at the end of the 1990s, the pressure on Blaise Compaoré's 'semi-authoritarian regime' had steadily increased (Hilgers and Loada, 2013, Hilgers, 2010, Loada, 2010). During the global food price crisis of 2008, tens of thousands participated in food riots, general strikes and demonstrations against the high cost of living (Engels, 2015). This was followed only three years later by the next wave of protests when secondary school student Justin Zongo (no relation to Norbert Zongo) died in the town of Koudougou after he had been arrested several times by the gendarmerie. The protests that followed spread rapidly throughout the country.

Between March and May 2011 there were several mutinies by various military units and by the presidential

guard. Blaise Compaoré was forced to flee temporarily from Ouagadougou and was only able to overcome what was the worst crisis his government had faced by dissolving his cabinet, appointing a new prime minister, and showing his willingness to compromise on the demands of trade unions and other civil society groups as well as the military (CNP, 2011). At this point it was already foreseeable that the question of a possible renewed candidature in the presidential elections would represent the next major conflict. When it became apparent that Compaoré aspired to a fifth term of office, party political and civil society alliances both independently mobilised against him. The protests were directed at Compaoré's attempt to change Article 37 of the Burkinabe constitution in order to be allowed to run for re-election as president in 2015 (Loada and Romaniuk, 2014).

In addition to the existing opposition alliances of trade unions, human rights organisations, professional associations and students, in July 2013 this wave of protests saw the emergence of a new civil society group – the *Balai Citoyen* – literally 'citizens' broom' (Chouli, 2015, Frère and Englebert, 2015: 301–3). The founders and frontmen of *Balai Citoyen* were the reggae musician Sams'K le Jah and the rapper Serge Bambara aka 'Smockey' (*Radio France Internationale*, 2013). They used their popularity as musicians to mobilise large numbers of people for the protests against Compaoré. Rhetorically at least, they placed themselves in the tradition of Thomas Sankara; the broom is symbolic of the wish to 'sweep out' Compaoré and his ruling élite. Sams'K le Jah declared to the press that 'The broom is a tribute to Thomas Sankara, who had organised weekly street cleaning actions' (*BBC News*, 2014).

Trade unions and student organisations again played an important role in the 2013 and 2014 demonstrations in which tens of thousands participated (*Jeune Afrique*, 2013, *Sidwaya*, 2014). The UAS announced a 24-hour strike for 11 November 2014 and a 48-hour strike for 25–26 November 2014 (UAS, 2014) but following Compaoré's forced resignation the strikes were called off (*Le Pays*, 2014). However, the base for these protests was significantly broader compared to previous waves of protest, notably those led by the 'Collectif' and the CCVC. This was due to the fact that the claims of the 2013–2014 protests were focused on stopping the constitutional referendum and hindering Compaoré's run for a fifth term. Other than the struggles against neoliberal structural adjustment and the high cost of living, where trade unions were at the forefront, the recent protests against the constitutional referendum were driven by more moderate actors, notably political (opposition) parties and the *Balai Citoyen*.

Compaoré had rapidly lost support even in his own party the ruling *Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès* (CDP). In January 2014, seventy five CDP politicians, some of them with considerable influence (for example Salif Diallo, former Special Advisor to Blaise Compaoré; Simon Comparoé, former Mayor of Ouagadougou; and, Roch Christian Kaboré, former President of the National Assembly), declared their resignation from the party and founded the *Mouvement pour le Peuple et le Progrès* (MPP), which is now the main political party in opposition to

Compaoré's CDP. However, the secession did not emerge from fundamental programmatic or ideological differences but from discontent about Compaoré's intention to establish his younger brother, François, as his successor (Chouli, 2015: 153, Frère and Englebert, 2015: 300). In particular, Salif Diallo, Simon Compaoré and Roch Christian Kaboré had been expelled from their former prominent positions within the ruling party and replaced by supporters of François Compaoré.<sup>1</sup>

### An Africa wide wave of protest

*Balai Citoyen* is modelled on the Senegalese movement *Y'en a marre* – literally, 'We've had enough of it' or 'We're sick and tired of it'. '*Ici aussi, y'en a marre!*' ('We've had enough of it, too!'), was the headline of a report about *Balai Citoyen* in the magazine *Jeune Afrique* (*Jeune Afrique*, 2013). *Y'en a marre* is also a movement by rap and hip-hop artists, who used their fame and their music to mobilise large numbers of young people for political protests within a short period of time.

Similar to Burkina Faso, at the beginning of 2012 Senegal's then president, Abdoulaye Wade, wanted a change in the constitution to allow him a further period in office. In spite of massive protests in which *Y'en a marre* played a major role, Wade pushed through the change in the constitution and stood for re-election. He lost, however, and did in fact stand down, and in March 2012 handed over power to his successor, Macky Sall.

Burkina Faso and Senegal are just two examples where social movements in Africa have protested against the aspirations of state presidents to extend their periods of office beyond the limit set in the constitution (Frère and Englebert, 2015: 305). During the course of liberalisation in the 1990s, the majority of African states placed clauses in their constitutions limiting the period of office of the president. Typically one re-election is permitted. In many states, presidents and political élites have striven for the removal of these clauses triggering protests by pro-democracy movements. In Malawi and Zambia, for example, these movements were successful in defending the limitation of the president's period of office, but in other cases, such as Uganda, they failed (Dulani, 2011).

The movements against the removal of the limit to periods in office is only one example of numerous social movements that have been active throughout the African continent since the early 2000s and which often demand fundamental political and economic change (Bond, 2014, Manji and Ekine, 2012). Firoze Manji (2012) described this as 'African awakening'. Well-known examples are the service delivery protests and the movements of shack dwellers in South Africa (Alexander, 2010, Pithouse, 2008) and the protests against increases in food and petrol prices (Patel and McMichael, 2009). It is typical of most of the protests that they promote socioeconomic and democratic demands as inseparably intertwined and are thus directed against ruling parties and presidents who – as in Burkina Faso – have often been in power for many years or even decades.

### 'Our revolution has been stolen by the military'

There have been presidential elections and related conflicts over changes to the constitution and to other laws in numerous African countries in recent years. It is typical of these conflicts that the military plays a major role, as in Burkina Faso. In neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire conflicts over the electoral law in 2002 ended in a (failed) military coup and civil war – it took ten years until the next presidential election could take place. In Niger and in Guinea, elections were held at the end of 2010 following military putsches in February 2010 (Niger) and December 2008 (Guinea). In Mali, too, the army conducted a putsch in March 2012 against the then president Amadou Toumani Touré.

In view of the history of Burkina Faso since the 1960s and experiences in other West African states it is hardly surprising that the military took over temporarily after Blaise Compaoré was forced to resign. Nevertheless, some civil society activists were disappointed. They felt that the military had exploited the demonstrations. 'The military are stealing our revolution' was the comment of an activist on the day following Compaoré's resignation.<sup>2</sup> 'Give the civilians what belongs to them', demanded another activist in the news portal *lefaso.net* (2014). The army had conducted a coup d'état, declared the MBDHP chairman, Chrysogone Zougmore, who is also vice-president of the civil society alliance Coalition Against the High Cost of Living', at a press conference on 2 November 2014. The military had 'once again usurped the fruits of the heroic struggle of the people' (CCVC, 2014). This 'paves the way for antidemocratic endeavours, as the history of our country has taught us' (ibid, 1). The civil society organisations continued their mobilisation. A general strike against high fuel prices was held on 17–18 February 2015, and a nation-wide protest day was organised on 8 April 2015. Regarding the role of the military, it is important to note the internal conflicts within the armed forces, particularly between the Presidential Guard and other military units. These conflicts had already led to the insurgencies of 2011, and played a relevant role when the army coerced Blaise Compaoré to resign in 2014.

For a short while the euphoria over Compaoré's fall was great. In October 2014 the accumulated anger at a political élite that was regarded as corrupt, at a formal democracy that was felt to be a façade, and at enormous social inequality in one of the poorest countries in the world erupted in the protests. Compaoré, for many the personification of all of this, was to go. What specifically should happen after his fall remains to be seen, but it is clear that elections must take place and that a democratically legitimated and civilian government be established.

These challenges are enormous. In the fifty-four years since decolonisation, the political system in Burkina Faso has been characterised by putsches and military rule – and half of this period was under Blaise Compaoré. In 2015, if it proves possible for the first time in the country's history to choose a president in free elections who does not come from the military and takes office for the first time, he (it is unlikely that the president will be a woman) must take the responsibility for the political, social and legal

reappraisal of the Blaise Compaoré era. This includes the development of a party system that makes representative democracy possible and in which other parties can seriously compete with the CDP after its two decades as the ruling party. Until now, party politics in Burkina Faso have mainly served as a way to secure access to state resources and their distribution to one's own clientele. The greatest challenge perhaps lies in the redefinition of the role of the military. Above all, this means the effective limitation of the power of the military, the neutralisation of the army as a political actor and the subjugation of the armed forces to transparent parliamentary control.

There must be a legal reappraisal of cases of murder and 'disappearances' that in all probability were politically motivated – not only the well-known cases of Thomas Sankara and Norbert Zongo, but also those of a number of activists from the student, human rights and trade union movements. An important requirement for ensuring that future governments in Burkina Faso do not use the same violent methods for dealing with the opposition as in the past is the clarification and public reappraisal of these cases, and legal proceedings against the perpetrators and those politicians and military figures responsible. The next change of government in Burkina Faso must not result in dozens of deaths as in the past.

### Competing Interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

### Author Information

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am particularly grateful to one anonymous reviewer for clarifying this point.

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with the author, 1 November 2014.

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